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DEPT PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP FOR RJACHIM/SRAMESH, DRL/IRF
FOR AGOMBIS, AND DRL/NESCA FOR EBARKS-RUGGLES/JLIEBERMAN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: DESPITE PUBLIC OUTCRY, MUTAWWA'IN REMAIN ROOTED IN
SAUDI SOCIETY

REF: A. RIYADH 01133
[¶](#)B. RIYADH 01412

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Gfoeller for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In recent weeks, there has been unprecedented media coverage of three legal cases involving the mutawwa'in or religious police working for the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). Two cases allege that CPVPV members, including non-field staff, murdered a Saudi man in Riyadh and another in the northern town of Tabuk. The third case dates back to 2003, when CPVPV members are accused of abducting a woman and her daughter for dressing improperly. These cases highlight CPVPV's failure to implement promised reforms of the mutawwa'in. Public response to the allegations has been mixed, with some Saudis rejecting the CPVPV's encroachment of privacy and the vigilante-like behavior of some mutawwa'in (septel). The SAG's efforts to circumscribe the influence of the CPVPV are consistent with Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal's commitments to Ambassador John Hanford in July [¶](#)2006. However, the majority of Saudis are supportive on some level of the CPVPV, which continues to draw strength from the religious establishment deeply rooted within Saudi society. Therefore, the SAG's fundamental need to strike a balance with these religious elements ensures that the CPVPV as an institution will continue to exist for the foreseeable future, although potentially with diminished authority. END SUMMARY.

In as a Healthy Man; Out in a Funeral Procession

[¶](#)2. (C) There has been significant negative coverage recently in the Saudi press of the mutawwa'in or religious police, who work for the Commission for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue (CPVPV). The press first reported that at least 18 mutawwa'in raided the Riyadh home of 28-year old Salman Al-Huraishi on May 23 on suspicion of alcohol production (reftel A). According to Al-Huraishi's father and brother, who were arrested with him, the mutawwa'in beat Al-Huraishi in his home and at the CPVPV office. He fell unconscious in the CPVPV office and never recovered. Subsequently, the media reported that one CPVPV member would be tried for allegedly attacking Al-Huraishi, but no trial date has been announced. In a June interview on Orbit television, CPVPV Deputy-Director General Ibrahim Al-Huwaimil conceded that the individual who was supposedly responsible for Al-Huraishi's death was an administrative CPVPV member -- not a field officer -- who should not have participated in the raid. The Arab News reported on July 18 that Al-Huraishi's father refused to drop charges, despite offers

of compensation from CPVPV members. He also insisted on the death penalty for those responsible for killing his son.

¶13. (U) In the northern city of Tabuk, a part-time CPVPV member reportedly arrested 50-year old retired border guard Ahmad Al-Bulawi on June 1 on suspicion of being in "illegal seclusion," or alone with an unrelated woman. This member suspected Al-Bulawi of inappropriate behavior when he saw a woman getting into Al-Bulawi's car outside of an amusement park. Subsequent investigations revealed that Al-Bulawi was running an unofficial taxi business to supplement his pension. After Al-Bulawi entered the CPVPV office, he fell to the ground and died immediately of a heart attack. His cousin, Ouda Al-Bulawi, told the Associated Press on June 23 that "he went into custody a healthy man. He got out in a funeral procession." While the official medical report cleared the mutawwa'in and ascribed Al-Bulawi's death to natural causes, public outcry escalated after the autopsy report revealed that Al-Bulawi was beaten on his face. Three hearings were held in Tabuk in July to try the three mutawwa'in and one policeman involved in the case. The next trial is scheduled to begin on August 24. If the defendants are found guilty, the family of the deceased has requested that they receive the death penalty.

¶14. (U) The mutawwa'in are also implicated in the unprecedented case of Umm Faisal, a woman whose real name is withheld in public records. There are different newspaper accounts of the details, but most agree that two mutawwa'in stopped Umm Faisal and her daughter outside of an amusement park in 2003 and accused them of promiscuity and being improperly dressed. Then the mutawwa'in dragged Umm Faisal's driver out of the car and drove off with the two women still in the back seat. En route to the CPVPV office, the mutawwa'in allegedly drove the car into an electrical post

and then left the women at the scene of the accident. According to the May 14 Arab News, one mutawwa'in was tried and found guilty for his actions by the Court of Grievances, which adjudicates claims of abuse by government and public individuals. Umm Faisal filed the first lawsuits against the CPVPV in December 2003, first with the Riyadh General Court, which rejected her lawsuit supposedly on the basis of a 40-year old fatwa, and then with the Court of Grievances, which offered some compensation. Unsatisfied with the result, she appealed the Court's decision in 2007. Her third appeal hearing, scheduled to begin on September 1, will address her claim for compensation for her damaged car, medical bills, and emotional trauma.

¶15. (U) In addition to these three cases, there are other alleged reports of deaths and assaults involving the mutawwa'in. In a June 18 Okaz article, Bushra Faisal Al-Sebaei described a litany of beatings and deaths of Saudis, including a young man who was beaten "until his face bled and his clothes were ripped to pieces" only to discover later that it was a case of mistaken identity. There have also been reports that the CPVPV is being investigated for the incident in May 2007, when an Asian maid was severely injured after jumping out of her fourth-story apartment during a mutawwa'in raid.

¶16. (C) It is worth noting that these incidents took place despite promises of CPVPV reform. For example, Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin Abdul Aziz issued a decree in May 2006 that forbids the mutawwa'in from interrogating detained suspects and requires them to turn over detainees to the regular police for interrogation. The alleged physical attacks appear to contradict this decree, despite the claims from CPVPV Director General Sheikh Ibrahim Bin Abdullah Al-Ghaith on June 11 that "our work is only detention and the recording of offenses."

Public and Private Reactions to the Allegations

¶17. (C) CPVPV Director General Al-Ghaith denounced media

reports about the Al-Bulawi and Al-Huraishi deaths and rallied behind his members, musing at a June 16 press conference that "those with their feet in water are not like those whose feet are in fire." In a June 10 interview with Al-Ikhbariyah satellite channel, Al-Ghaith appealed to the media to "fear God in their reports by double checking first their facts... (and) avoid double standard by using different standards when reporting about the (CPVPV)." He also announced several new reforms, including the creation of a new Legal and Directive Department, designation of official CPVPV spokesmen in each region, training for 380 members in interpersonal skills, and establishing a central hotline to report any incidents. In other interviews, Al-Ghaith emphasized the CPVPV efforts to implement promised reforms, including reviewing fieldwork procedures. During an informal conversation, Human Rights Commission Press Section Head Mohammed Ali Al Muadi (strictly protect) ascribed Al-Ghaith's repetitious manner of defending the CPVPV to his implicit ties to his benefactors. He elaborated that "Al-Ghaith is paid well, has a nice car, and his family is taken care of." While Al-Ghaith may appear truly incensed about the media onslaught, Al Muadi asserts that he knows that his job is secure and the CPVPV is not at risk.

¶8. (C) A number of contacts have expressed concern about the CPVPV's encroachment of privacy and mutawwa'in-enforced piety. The Majlis Al-Shura (Consultative Council) also appeared to censure the CPVPV by voting against certain proposals in June (septel). However, many Saudis argue that a "few bad apples" do not represent the entire organization. A June 25 op-ed in the English-language Saudi Gazette repudiated the idea of "fighting against a whole organization because of the alleged mistakes of some individuals." According to several papers, on June 9, Prince Nayif labeled the mistakes as "unintentional." On Saudi TV1's June 11 "Fatwas on Air" program, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abd Al Aziz Bin Abdullah Al Al Sheikh noted that he was "impressed with the statements by Prince Nayif" and echoed the idea that "mistakes happen, but what we should do is deal with mistakes with wisdom and kindness." In addition, Ouda Al-Bulawi commented in several articles that preachers in Tabuk discussed the trial during their Friday sermons and proclaimed the innocence of the accused mutawwa'in. In a private conversation on June 22, Russian Affairs Researcher and Advisor at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Call, and Guidance, Dr. Majed Al-Turki rejected the media accounts as merely "ideas of their liberal editors" who do not reflect most of his friends and family.

¶9. (U) Saudi chat room participants also have expressed admiration for the CPVPV and relief that public figures like Al-Ghaith defended the CPVPV. On the popular Al Sahat website, known for its wide range of members, one participant submitted a list of CPVPV achievements, and well-known conservative cleric Sheikh Sulayman Al-Duwaysh warned on the same website that "the state will be finished if the (CPVPV) is ended." In the religiously conservative Benaa chat room, one participant cited a Hadith as proof that the CPVPV members are "spiritually the most perfect and the highest in status" and another participant wrote a poem praising the CPVPV. Even a few participants in the liberal Al Huria chat room, which usually criticizes conservatives, have written about the need to be rational and find a substitute for the CPVPV, before abolishing the institution.

Comment

¶10. (C) It is unprecedented for the Al-Saud to permit such public media coverage and criticism of the mutawwa'in within the dynastically-controlled Saudi media (reftel B). In partial fulfillment of the commitments made by Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal to Ambassador John Hanford in July 2006, clearly the Saudi government is working to rein in the mutawwa'in and hold them accountable for their actions. While there are Saudis who reject the vigilante-like behavior

of some mutawwa'in, many Saudis remain supportive on some level of the CPVPV, which continues to draw strength from the religious establishment that is deeply rooted within Saudi society and helps define the legitimacy of the Al Saud reign.

Despite the SAG's efforts to circumscribe the CPVPV's influence, its fundamental need to strike a balance with these traditional religious elements ensures that the CPVPV as an institution will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. END COMMENT.

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